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## Gendered Voyages into Coolitude: the Shaping of the Indo-Caribbean Woman's Literary Consciousness

### Abstract

The arrival of some 551,000 Indians who, to use Mahadai Das's phrase, 'came in ships like cattle', to the Caribbean, constitutes an indisputable event in the historical and cultural development of the Caribbean region where East Indians nowadays make up more than half of the population in Trinidad and Guyana. This voyage played a crucial role in the collision between worlds and the encounter between what were mostly migrating cultures, all of them leaving behind the original! 'authentic'<sup>2</sup> forms of the mother-country. From 1838 onwards, as the English needed more labour to keep their trade going and reassert their authority, Indian men and women were seduced, persuaded or bluntly stolen from their motherland to become slaves under another name: indentured labourers. As they were 'driven by desperate poverty in India to sell their souls for five years and risk all for a chance of a better life? they embarked upon ships that were forever to take them to a distant part of the Empire.

VÉRONIQUE BRAGARD

## Gendered Voyages into Coolitude: the Shaping of the Indo-Caribbean Woman's Literary Consciousness<sup>1</sup>

The arrival of some 551,000 Indians who, to use Mahadai Das's phrase, 'came in ships like cattle', to the Caribbean, constitutes an indisputable event in the historical and cultural development of the Caribbean region where East Indians nowadays make up more than half of the population in Trinidad and Guyana. This voyage played a crucial role in the collision between worlds and the encounter between what were mostly migrating cultures, all of them leaving behind the original/ 'authentic'<sup>2</sup> forms of the mother-country. From 1838 onwards, as the English needed more labour to keep their trade going and reassert their authority, Indian men and women were seduced, persuaded or bluntly stolen from their motherland to become slaves under another name: indentured labourers. As they were 'driven by desperate poverty in India to sell their souls for five years and risk all for a chance of a better life',<sup>3</sup> they embarked upon ships that were forever to take them to a distant part of the Empire. The two systems, namely slavery and indentureship, were similar in many ways: the kidnapping act, the conditions of servitude, the laws of coercion, the homesickness and cultural disorientation establish obvious parallels between both colonial schemes. As Samaroo points out, 'the major difference lay in the time of servitude: for the slave it was a lifetime experience, for the East Indian it was, in the first instance, for five years'.<sup>4</sup> Yet, unlike the African slaves who were denied their very humanity and whose uprootedness was of an extreme kind as most of them were deprived of their name, language and selves, the Coolies<sup>5</sup> had a signature, i.e., a name and an identity.

If the first generation of Indo-Caribbean writers, which includes major writers such as V.S. Naipaul or Sam Selvon, greatly contributed to the emergence and assertion of the Caribbean literary creativeness, they did not revisit what has been called the Second Middle Passage and the servitude that followed. Caught between assimilation and tradition, their writing displays interest in their Indian heritage and the Indo-Caribbean consciousness but it mostly deals with their journey to the metropolis, the immigration experience, the detachment and contradictory feelings about their culture as well as the mimic behaviour engendered by the colonial

system. In some of their works, an attempt is made to revisit indentureship but 'only the negative, external aspects of estate life are seen and the individual humanity of the estate worker preserved against all the odds, is lost sight of'.<sup>6</sup>

Victor J. Ramraj's claim that Sonny Ladoo's *No Pain Like this Body* (1972) is 'one of the few Indo-Caribbean works to focus on the indenture experience'<sup>7</sup> is currently challenged by a new generation of artists, who, like many contemporary post-colonial writers, feel the need to give a voice to the numerous facets of history as we near the end of the millennium, an era of globalization and overinformation which paradoxically does not leave any large space to memory. Sonny Ladoo but also Rooplall Monar, Clem Maharaj, David Dabydeen feel 'it should be time to hymn [their] own wreck'.<sup>8</sup> Emerging women authors such as Janice Shinebourne, Mahadai Das, Narmala Shewcharan, Lakshmi Persaud and Ramabai Espinet have also opted for a direct confrontation with the past and its catastrophic but also creative consequences as they are filling the gaps in both a gendered and ethnic-centred discourse. In Indo-Caribbean women writers' poetry or fiction, the sailing into the past, the journey back to India, the torturing images of indentureship as well as the political and racial turmoil interweave with the dynamic of transformation and growth. The rewriting of history reveals a need to rechart a past that has been denied, forgotten and which is still hidden 'in the blank spaces between the lines, in the dashes, the pauses between commas, semicolons, colons, in the microcosmic shadow world between full stops',<sup>9</sup> to use Mahadai Das's phrase, an 'Unpagged History' lost through the selective reconstruction of historians.<sup>10</sup>

The Coolie's I-story has been silenced by both the world of publication and criticism trapped in an Afro-centric or western perspective. It is only a year ago that the Mauritian writer Khal Torabully has coined the word *Coolitude*, giving the experience of the Coolies a name. In his work that suggests a theoretical but also very poetical framework, the term *Coolitude* of course alludes to *Négritude* (though as my essay will show avoids the pitfalls of essentialism) and is defined by the author as the 'alter ego of creolity'<sup>11</sup> or the 'acclimatization of Indian culture on plural grounds' (p. 71). Khal Torabully's definition emerges as a deep assertion of a literary voice for all the Coolies around the world. As he points out, Coolies leave a lot of traces behind (places of cult, feasts, cooking) but in literature, 'the silence of the coolies is unsettling' (p. 65). These 'latest arrivants in the complexity code of plural societies' cannot remain voiceless: 'his/her identity must be expressed, tuned into alterity, without denying any of his/her roots, making his/her the intercultural humus' (p. 71).

In the Caribbean, the Coolie woman's voice has been silent but also silenced because of numerous reasons that 'must be sought not only in economic geography, the marginalization of Indo-Caribbean culture and general gender disadvantage, but in the past at least, in Indian attitudes to the education of girls'.<sup>12</sup> The Indo-Guyanese pioneer writer Rajkumari

Singh, one of the first women to be politically engaged in Guyana, was also the first to assert her pride in being a Coolie woman, thereby claiming her contribution to the Caribbean and a past that is still denied. Her rethinking of the word Coolie emerges as a deep historical and cultural reification, an argument for 'the reinflection and political mobilization of 'Coolie' as a term of affirmation rather than denigration'.<sup>13</sup>

Is it not time that we should think about this word ... re-think, rather ... It all started with our forefathers, remember ... this is the name of our hard-working, economy-building forefathers who were called COOLIE! ... The word brings to mind 'rows and rows of toilers' – coolie men and women – with soft mud squelching between their toes, up to their breasts, in water, planting rice ... All this they gave to us and more. In return for our HERITAGE what greater tribute can we pay to them than to keep alive the name by which they were called. COOLIE is a beautiful word that conjures up poignancy, tears, defeats, achievements.<sup>14</sup>

Her exclamation: 'Proclaim the word! Identify with the word! Proudly say to the world: "I AM A COOLIE"' echoes Khal's ideology and shows, how, like the Negro with *Négritude*, they both have turned an insulting word into a dignified name and heritage.

Like the Second Middle Passage, the East-Indian woman figure has been marginalized in most history books and has been made 'invisible'<sup>15</sup> in Caribbean literature for a long time. The Indian women who arrived in the Caribbean were very often not the 'right kind of women,' for many social or economic circumstances had actually forced them to become independent or, in the words of men 'uncontrollable'.<sup>16</sup> Indian women were involved in estates but were ascribed, because of the sexual division of labour, the lowest paid occupations, e.g., weeding and cane-cutting. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a change in policy towards the establishment of families emerged. As R.E. Reddock points out: 'By the 1870s therefore, owning a wife had become a social and economic necessity and controlling her an issue of life and death. But for large numbers of women this subjugation was not what they had come for' (Reddock, p. 42). In reaction to the efforts to reconstruct the patriarchal Indian family, many women of course attempted to maintain a certain degree of autonomy. And 'the Indian men resorted to the weapon used historically and internationally for this purpose: violence' (Reddock, p. 44). But women did not abandon the fight. At the beginning of the twentieth century, formerly indentured women became 'housewives' for most of their work was hidden within the household or domestic economy and not recognized as such. As a consequence, women, like other women all over the world, became separated from wage labour. When the Indian nationalist movement emerged, although the woman's question was present, it was relegated to a peripheral concern after, for example, the resentment on the part of Africans

or the legalization of non-Christian marriages. Yet, women took part in the Indian cultural resurgence and effervescence that emerged in British Guiana in the 1920s; nor did it prevent them from founding in June 1927, the first women's organization in British Guiana, the East Indian Ladies' Guild under the presidency of Alice Bhagwandai Singh. In the 1940s and 1950s, 'the earlier desire among Indian men for an "uplifted womanhood" as a sign of their modernisation was no longer present. On the contrary, the trend appears to have been more towards consolidating the "otherness" of the Indian women in contradistinction to the Creolized African women' (Reddock, p. 309). This attitude participated in the re-awakening of Indian cultural nationalism that stressed the existence of a separate Indian identity while reviving specific aspects of the Indian heritage, including the subordination and seclusion of women. It is only in the 1960s that the position of the Indian woman changed because of a rapid expansion of schooling and a considerable economic growth, the consequence of which was the 'much greater acceptance of the contribution the Indian woman can make as a wage-earner to the family's participation in the consumer economy'.<sup>17</sup> But, although gender systems are still undergoing redefinition, her position has hardly changed. Her struggle for recognition and identity mirrors the Caribbean fight for independence in which gender has for long been very peripheral in comparison to race and cultural/political independence.

The Second Middle Passage or the crossing of the *Kala Pani* (dark waters) constitutes of course a bitter odyssey that becomes in both Mahadai Das and Ramabai Espinet's poetry a mythical journey intrinsically linked with indentureship and the conditions of a servile bondage. Mahadai Das, who started her literary career in the 1970s, reviews this crucial displacement in her poem 'They came in Ships'<sup>18</sup> which opens her first collection of poetry *I Want to Be a Poetess of My People* (1976), a collection which buoyantly traces the history of the Indo-Guyanese from indentureship to revolution. The poetess goes back in time but also in space as she travels back to India and British expansion which she openly attacks. The narrator weaves together a tapestry of visionary landscapes that give us the impression we are walking through an imaginary city of the East-Indian experience where we can hear 'the cry of the coolies echo(ing) around the land' (p. 4), a cry which echoes the scars left over by this forced migration. One can feel despair, solitude and suffering 'under the yoke of their burden' in an 'endless reality in chains'; one can see people dying or starving at the street-corners or notice the children and women at work in the fields. Indentureship and oppression have started.<sup>19</sup> As she proceeds in her description of what is actually a peoplescape, the author points to the large variety of people who would cross dark waters because of very different reasons, dreams and aspirations which are then contrasted with what they were actually encountered: terrible working conditions, disease and death.

With repetitions and the use of the different connotative meanings of the word 'cattle', Mahadai Das uncommonly offers a multi-faceted image of the whole inner forced displacement as well as the vain attempts to improve the work conditions, so close to what is known as 'slavery', attempts that she describes with much irony but also with pride, dignity and hope. The poem is deeply concerned with resistance and strength, the slaves' and Indians' fight for respect and freedom embodied in Reverend John Smith, Lallabhaigie, Cuffy, Crosby and Des Voeux, amongst others. Das's words convey the problems and sufferings the Second Middle Passage engendered, pointing to how crucial this past was for the shaping of the future. The narrator stands alone, almost outside of the world, outside of history. She has survived and is looking ahead, wondering about the future.

The Trinidadian writer Ramabai Espinet re-uses the image of the ship in her poem 'Lost Cargoes' which closes her collection *Nuclear Seasons*. The narrator equally penetrates the granite eyes and past of her grandfather, a past of cargoes of pain, cane-slashed legs, barracks, lost times. A past of 'grieving through/Distances impossible/To measure'. A past of dignity and hope epitomized in the narrator's grandfather leaving her a flourbag sack with an unwritten message. The opening of the bag and finding of 'ragged sights/Bone and weed dipped in the sea's/Long washing'<sup>20</sup> embodies the narrator's discovery and appropriation of her Indian heritage, an heritage from which she has to construe her own identity, 'make a whole,/A life/Lighten the water, plant flowers/Gather the sea, lace the land' (p. 87). Ramabai Espinet here echoes Mahadai Das's image of the bone which is central in her last collection of the same name in which bones are resurrected to sing a heritage, to invent an identity that brings together all the different aspects of the Indo-Caribbean but also immigrant woman experience. They become flutes of expression, the tongue of the self that is resurrected and grows. Identity is reshaped by the discovery and exploration of the past. The recurrent reference to the bone flute, which finds its origins in an Amerindian South-American legend, establishes links with several Caribbean writers, essentially Wilson Harris, who has used the flute of bone to 're-trace one's steps over lost ground, to visualise a womb of recovery'.<sup>21</sup>

While sailing back into time, writers equally rehearse the hardships of the indenture period and plantation life linked with the Second Middle Passage, whose suffering and pain is recalled in the numerous images in which the body is dismembered, wounded, beaten, scarred, appropriated, abused, disintegrated into inanimate parts. This 'explosion' of the body stands as an image of inner fragmentation and as part of a process of deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of identity or as a result of inner or physical migration. This disembodiment works as an echo of the hardships faced by the plantation workers but also the dismemberment of cultural values by a Western-centred colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Yet, the burden left over by the history of colonization did not prevent



East-Indians from contributing to the important achievements of their new country by e.g., instituting rice cultivation in the Caribbean, a contribution of which Mahadai Das often reminds the reader. In her poem 'An Ageable Woman', Ramabai Espinet goes further and reclaims the new country her forefathers have helped build with their sweat, hard work and suffering as she makes it clear that, unlike the colonizers and even neo-colonizers, she did not purchase it:

This Caribbean is mine  
 Not because I've bought it  
 Or bartered it  
 Or because I sell  
 Trade or use it  
 Or find it to be  
 'A lovely piece of real estate' (p. 81)

No, this Caribbean is hers because of her contribution to the building of the land with her work, sweat and suffering, as jiggers (small mites), bore holes through her bare 'rice planting feet'. The authors' claiming the land as theirs triggers off a reconsideration of what it means to be a member of a community or nation. This question is all the more crucial in the current globalization and migrational world of the late twentieth century.

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The assertion and rewriting of the past goes hand in hand with an image of suffering but also of survival. With the emergence of Indian women's writing, a new perspective and image of the Indo-Caribbean woman have emerged and subverted the stereotyped visions of Indian women as, for example, demure seductresses or passive and silent mothers. As in Rajkumarie Singh's poem 'Per-Ajie: a Tribute to the First Immigrant Woman' which celebrates the great-coolie grandmother's strength and contribution, women become dignified as they are portrayed as participating in the achievements of their own community. Indian women become part of Caribbean history in which writers try to rehabilitate their presence and crucial role. Their work is portrayed in very simple terms that convey admiration for their strength and dignity.

Nevertheless, many Indo-Caribbean Women writers realize that although there is progress, although women are extremely strong and have honourably contributed to the achievements of the Indian community in the Caribbean, gender remains an obstacle, a social, cultural construction of differences. In Das's second and even more in her third collection of poems, the author becomes aware of and explores the very restrictions gender forces onto women. At the end of *My Finer Steel will Grow* (1982), her second collection, she ironically alludes to women's domestic chores and how their men are well-served; an image she would herself reject but which is part of



the image she conjures up at the end of her collection 'in seeking an image of love which is whole, uncomplicated and freely given ... an idyllic picture of East Indian peasant life'.<sup>22</sup> Mahadai Das refuses and denounces the limitations of gender which are also encouraged by ethnic prejudices. In her last collection *Bones*, she portrays the immigrant woman as exploited, enclosed, possessed and used by a male money-centred world:

He grabs my tiara, my bangles  
of silver. He gives me tokens  
to send me to his factory,  
send me to his store,  
cage me in his offices,  
keep me in his kitchens. (Das, *Bones*, p. 23)

Mahadai Das points out that the limitations of gender also have an impact on her work as a female poet. Society and the publishing world relegate her to the status of 'monster' as the narrator, who looks at her creation and perceives her work as a monstrous conception.

More importantly, patriarchal Indian values clash with the striving for new gender roles. Ethnic assertion and traditional Indian culture become conflictual. Janice Shinebourne's *The Last English Plantation* (1988)<sup>23</sup> which is set in the 1950s, the years that destabilized Guyana and witnessed an anti-India propaganda, points to this paradox. The episode which is to be remembered as 'You want to be a coolie woman?' perfectly illustrates the dilemma to which the Indian woman is confronted. After telling her daughter how hypocritical and vulgar Hindus are, how they arrange marriages, June's mother proceeds to describe the gender roles ascribed to women by the Indian traditional culture:

they drink rum, they just eat and drink rum in their spare time, and beat their wives, and fight at the rumshops and the weddings ... Their wives cook from three o'clock in the morning to late at night. You want to be a coolie woman? Well be a coolie woman! I don't care! Coolie women have to carry all the burdens for the men, the burden of the sick, the old, the children, burying the dead, and no thanks for it, only licks! (p. 128)

The main character in *The Last English Plantation*, June, slowly becomes aware that her reclaiming of Hinduness and search for a cultural identity is at odds with her mother's aspirations for her future, which do not fit with the traditional image of the Indian woman. Her mother Lucille, having internalized colonial values, sees her daughter's emancipation in a very British education and a need to distance herself from her Indianness. As June discovers colonial mimicry and silencing, she realizes that not only her roots but also her language are being erased by the colonial system. Janice Shinebourne records the stifling of June's Indian inheritance and mother tongue which is erased by a system that forces her to speak a language with which she cannot express her own reality:

She spoke Hindi in those days, until Lucille and St. Peter's school erased it from her tongue ... Schoolwork had the same effect. It all erased the Hindi, the language of the coolies, the poor. The new language, English, did not only translate the books into her mind, it also translated New Dam. The more she absorbed the books, the more she became conscious that their words were not the words the people around her used about the same life, and she would listen to the differences. But then she began to understand that it was not just different words but different points of view she was really hearing. (p. 33)

On the other hand, Nani, who embodies the last stand of traditional India, 'a voice from the past which the present shoved aside' (p. 151), provides June with an alternative model. Like many young female Caribbean protagonists, June must come to terms with this fragmented identity and move beyond a cultural, psychic deadlock. But, as J. Poynting remarks, 'the issue of gender *and* Indianness is much more difficult to resolve'.<sup>24</sup> The last chapter of Janice Shinebourne's novel, which pictures Nani retelling the Indian myths and thereby reviving the 'myth of exile' (p. 182), probably offers the promise of a better future in which the character negotiates and reinvents her split inheritance. Mahadai Das's phrase 'If I come to India ... will I find myself?'<sup>25</sup> shows how allotted roots are constantly put into doubt. It sets out the condition of living between cultures and histories and points to the complexity and non-existence of a so-called 'solution' to this problem of cultural identity. The notions of identity and roots are questioned. The Indian world often becomes a 'lost world', 'the end of a world'<sup>26</sup> which stresses the narrator's misplacement. In her poem 'Hosay Night', Ramabai Espinet makes it clear that the Indo-Caribbean identity is not rooted in India but in the Caribbean itself. The last stanza of her poem is both revealing and ironical:

This land is home to me  
Now homeless, a true refugee  
Of the soul's last corner  
Daddhu days and babu days  
And Mai in ohni days  
Lost to me – like elephants  
And silks, the dhows of Naipaul's  
Yearnings, not mine (p. 10)

The author ironically alludes to V.S. Naipaul's pessimistic view of the Caribbean and vain attempt to find his identity in India. The title of the poem is of course revealing when we know that Hosay night refers to a popular night street festival in Trinidad, now shared by that country's blending of races. The reference to the 'ohni', the traditional veil worn over the heads of Hindu women, as a traditional element from the past, is also stressed by Narmala Shewcharan who notes that it belongs to the preceding generation (p. 132). This particular reference points to the important process of change women are going through, the movement away from the traditional values of their community.

Janice Shinebourne's first novel *Timepiece* (1986) actually takes place after the last English plantation as Sandra, who closely resembles June, is now a trainee 'female reporter'. She travels into the past as she goes back to her village, which, after the closing of the estate has died and has been devoured by the bush. It is actually when Sandra enters her dead grandmother's room that she initiates a voyage into Guyanese history, a voyage into independence and womanhood, a voyage which is not without obstacles. Here again, Janice Shinebourne tackles the question of gender with great subtlety, pointing at the restrictions imposed by the traditional values like the confinement of women to house chores: 'her job was to keep the children fed and house clean, clothes washed and food cooked'<sup>27</sup> (p. 37); 'girl children must stay home and mind children and their home' (p. 42). These go against any commitment of women in public life or education. Yet, if gender unites women in a 'maternal council' (p.36), race and class separate them in many instances:

They said that at Wismar women had held down women to be raped – Afro-Guyanese women held down Indo-Guyanese women to be raped in revenge for their men preferring them, revenge against their men too. Violence was always a weapon used by one sex against the other sex, so it was inevitable it would be used by one race against the other. (p. 17)

Janice Shinebourne also shows that urban more 'Western' life equally excludes women by reducing them, looking down on them and 'keeping them in their place' (p. 74), confining them to specific female roles. In a world, which, according to Sandra, does not have 'a sense of the past' (p.137), the protagonist tries to make her way in a town divided by political and racial riots. She feels homesick, an outsider from the 'Coolie country' (p. 68) and longs for a past of simplicity and community life.

The conflicts between past and present, gender and ethnicity, Western and traditional values point to the larger issue of choice between community life and the pursuit of an individual destiny, the search for an idiosyncratic identity. In Lakshmi Persaud's *Sastra* (1993), a novel that is also set against a background of racial tensions and negotiations, the author shows that distance from community and tradition can lead to suffering but also empowerment. Sastra makes her own choice when she breaks the path of tradition and marries the man she loves. Her parents are strongly opposed to this marriage which will sooner or later make Sastra a widow since Rabindranath suffers from leukaemia. A widow does not have any place in a conservative Hindu community. Sastra's choosing of her own her destiny and going against her Karma will lead to her rejection by her community and family, which in the diaspora, according to E. Nelson, becomes 'the chief vehicle for cultural transmission'.<sup>28</sup> The peculiar situation she has to face illustrates that she is an outsider to both her community and the other communities, for she does not wish to distance herself from the Indian world. There is in Persaud's novel, on the one hand, a distancing from the

Indian traditional male-centredness and dependence on community but, on the other a deep assertion of Indianness in the detailed description of the preparation of food rituals, as well as in the portrayal of women who bring up children, cook, guide the family and work in the shop. After years of pain because of her husband's death, strength and wholeness eventually triumph. The protagonist changes her parents' strict traditionalism to a certain extent, thereby 'daughtering' them, a notion that recurs in other works as narrators, by taking another destiny, change their parents' views of things.

Narmala Shewcharan's *Tomorrow is Another Day* (1994) is far from the romantic perspective and bourgeois setting adopted by Lakhmi Persaud, but also portrays a woman faced with family, social, economic and political convulsions. Corruption, fear, chaos, disintegration, abuse of power, individualism, the dilemma of the idealistic constitute common points with Shinebourne's *Timepiece*. Although it offers a darker vision, it is far from being deprived of strength and ideal. Among the numerous stories which the author subtly intertwines, Chandini's struggle to keep her family emerges as central. While some join the opposite party and others flee to 'the richman's country',<sup>29</sup> her husband Lal sacrifices his family for a fight for a better tomorrow of his country. After he is killed in political riots, Chandini, like a mythical Indian widow, sacrifices herself for the sake of her children, 'the only way to give them the better things in life ... a joke on the insurance company' (p. 233). Women, gender and family become here peripheral and fall prey to political ideals. The violence that permeates Guyanese society invades the relationship between man and woman, particularly in the scene where Lal reappears and nearly rapes his own wife (p. 197). Subjectivity and collectivity, microcosm and macrocosm are here closely interwoven. The wounds of the past seem to haunt the female Indo-Caribbean imaginary which needs to reconnect with subjective and collective history by inviting a re-reading of history from the Second Middle Passage to the racial and political riots of the 1950s.

From Indo-Caribbean women's creative voices emerge a reconstruction of a past that strives to be remembered and offers the possibility for Indo-Caribbean women to construct a new female consciousness that takes into account the history of indentureship, the Indian heritage and Caribbean multi-culturalism, so far denied and erased from history books. Yet, their writing very often stands off from historical location to embody metaphorical, melancholy, revolted or nostalgic meanings. But their work is far from being simply about nostalgia. Instead, it is about a cultural journey, about memory, history and the celebration of Indians' contribution and resistance. There is a deep need on the part of the narrators and authors to page the past, to unburden themselves by telling their story, for it affords release/relief into authentic being: 'those terrible times in Guyana are the times in which I grew up, and I am committed of necessity to write about them'<sup>30</sup> states Janice Shinebourne.

As they move between a language of diasporic loss of origin and use Indian words and references, Indo-Caribbean women writers offer a cultural representation of a new, personal syncretic perspective that examines the shortcomings and wealth of several worlds which they inscribe on a new literary palimpsest. They challenge not only the notion of homogenization but also of a monolithic feminism by showing the very different concerns that preoccupy 'Third World' women. Although they are proud of their heritage and past, Indo-Caribbean women writers fiercely criticize gender oppression within the Indian traditional system as they interrogate the contradictions that their diasporic experience forces on them. Yet, as they celebrate the woman's perspective, they point to the traditional values that are worth preserving thereby sharing the idea that the process of acculturation does not imply the complete relinquishing of Indian roots but adjustment and intermixing.

It is in fact metamorphosis or regeneration that lies at the heart of all those women's literary creativity. Their psychic fragmentation and dislocation engenders a crisis, a transformation and self-discovery. Resurrection or metamorphosis in its physical, visual and metaphorical forms permeate their writing and epitomize the shaping of an Indo-Caribbean female consciousness as narrators attempt to come to terms with the condition of living between various cultural homes, heritages and values, past and future. This image goes hand in hand with the concept of metamorphosis which embodies Carole Boyce Davies notion of 'migratory subjectivity', i.e., of a consciousness that is constantly in the process of being fashioned, a consciousness and cultural identity that is multiple and unsteady and transcends boundaries. Displacement is then associated with the fostering of new beginnings and the shaping of alternative identities. The narrators/authors have a sense of their consciousness being dominated and/or transformed by their pasts as well as the world they live in as they develop specific strategies for constructing associative identities that take into account the disparate and contradictory elements of their experience: traditional/modern, male/female, past/present/future, personal/collective. Their (re)construction of a new identity is associated with a negotiation of new cultural pathways. Regeneration and rebirth also establish links with the Indian cultural heritage and embody women's capacity to overcome their own limits.

Indo-Caribbean women's writing is certainly part of the Coolitude poetics and movement, i.e., a movement that strives for the rehabilitation of the history and dignified identity of the Coolies. Their writing, which traces back their origins and explores a new language, is imbued with what Khal defines as 'a desire to voice the missing part of the past and a projection in the plurality of the future ... to compensate for the loss of archives' (p. 71). Their creative memory gives their history a real voice thereby challenging the very notion of history and Western 'archivization' of the past. Yet, unlike other writers, Indo-Caribbean women writers do not resort to what Khal calls

'formal fleshing reminiscent of Modern poets' that would attempt to compensate for the lack of being and saying by the multiplication of language and literature devices. Instead, their writing is metaphorical, coloured, sensuous and even very Western as far as novels are concerned. Though fascinating, the parallel between Négritude and Coolitude is also misleading and incomplete in several ways. First, Coolitude is not a racial nor ethnic movement. This difference is visible in the terms that lie at the heart of the discussion here, namely 'Nigger' which refers to colour and 'Coolie' which refers more to a bondage and servitude. Khal even goes further and extends the definition of Coolie to 'the one who is without the text of his/her voyage' (p. 71). Négritude reflects some kind of essentialism that does not affect Coolitude in the same way. Another sharp distinction lies in the very concept of identity. While Négritude relied on a fixed and static identity, Coolitude, as it is defined by Khal and as it appears in the writings analysed above, seems to adhere to a contemporary vision of identity that is anchored in plurality and constant change. Coolitude is itself inscribed in diversity and takes different shapes and colours according to socio-historico-geographical contexts; it is the voice and the silence of an identity voyage echoing over countries and continents.

## NOTES

1. Some elements of the present article are part of Véronique Bragard, *The Flute of Voicelessness and New Birth: Mahadai Das and Ramabai Espinet's Indo-Caribbean Creative Memory* (MA thesis, University of Warwick/UK, 1997).
2. Tejaswini Niranjana in her article 'Gender, Identity and Cultural Politics: Studying the Culture of East Indian West Indians' presented at ISER-NCIC Conference on 'Challenge and Change: the Indian Diaspora in its Historical and Contemporary Context' (The University of the West Indies, 1995), develops the idea that the diasporic cultural forms have been trapped by the binaries original/derivative, authentic/inauthentic and are perceived as 'corrupt, imitative, degraded, a pale reflection of the "original" forms that are only to be found in the mother country'.
3. Narmala Shewcharan, *Tomorrow is Another Day* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1994), p. 50. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
4. Brinsley Samaroo, 'Two Abolitions: African Slavery and East Indian Indentureship', in *India in the Caribbean*, ed. by D. Dabydeen & B. Samaroo (London: Hansib, 1987), p. 27.
5. The term coolie has undergone several shifts in meaning: it first referred to the inhabitants of Kula (India) but was later used to designate a hired labourer. The definition was then extended to emigrant workers from India and associated with indentured labourers with a negative connotation. In the Longman Dictionary of 1987, the term 'coolie' designates '(esp. in India and some parts of the Far East) an unskilled worker', which illustrates both denigration and degradation.
6. Rooplall Monar, *Backdam People* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1985), p. 8.
7. Victor J. Ramraj, 'Diasporas and Multiculturalism', in *New National and Post-colonial Literatures*, ed. by B. King (Oxford: OUP, 1996), p. 219.
8. David Dabydeen, *Coolie Odyssey* (London: Hansib/Dangaroo, 1985), p. 9.
9. Sylvia Wynter, *The Hills of Hebron* (London: Longman, 1962), p. 53.



10. In her introduction to her novel *Jesus is Indian*, the Indian South African writer Agnes Sam points to the urgent need to delve into the system of indentureship which she argues has been bluntly suppressed from history books.
11. Khal Torabully, 'Coolitude', *Notre Librairie* (Dec. 1996), p. 71. My translation. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text. Khal's comparison can be contested in the context of the Caribbean where creolity is very much linked with an Afro-centred approach and where ethnic riots constitute a main difference in comparison with the Pacific Ocean. Yet, if it is understood according to Edouard Glissant's definition, it acquires a larger and appropriate meaning.
12. Jeremy Poynting, 'You want to Be a Coolie Woman?': Gender and Ethnic Identity in Indo-Caribbean Women's Writing', in *Caribbean Women Writers*, ed. by S. R. Cudjoe (Massachusetts: Calaloux Publication, 1990), p. 99.
13. *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Alison Donnell & Sarah Lawson Welsh (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 285.
14. Rajkumari Singh, 'I am a Coolie' (1973) in *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Alison Donnell & Sarah Lawson Welsh (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 352-353.
15. I am here referring to Ramabai Espinet, 'The Invisible Woman in West Indian Fiction', in *World Literature Written in English*, 29, 2 (1989), 116-126.
16. Rhoda E. Reddock, *Women, Labour & Politics in Trinidad and Tobago* (London: Zed Books, 1994), pp. 30-31. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
17. Jeremy Poynting, 'East Indian Women in the Caribbean: Experience and Voice', in *India in the Caribbean*, ed. by D. Dabydeen & B. Samaroo (London: Hansib, 1987), p. 239.
18. Mahadai Das, *I want to Be a Poetess of my People* (Guyana National Service Publishing Centre, 1977), p. 3-4. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
19. For a more detailed analysis of the poem, see Véronique Bragard 'The Flute of Voicelessness and Misplacement' in *African and Caribbean Women: Migration, Displacement, Diaspora* (University of Stirling: Centre of Commonwealth Studies, 1996), pp. 71-82.
20. Ramabai Espinet, *Nuclear Seasons* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1991), p. 87. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
21. Wilson Harris, 'The Enigma of Values', in *New Letters*, 40, 1 (Oct. 1973), p. 148. See also *Enigma of Values*, ed. by Kirsten Petersen and Anna Rutherford (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1974).
22. Poynting, 'East Indian Women in the Caribbean', p. 260.
23. Janice Shinebourne, *The Last English Plantation* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1988). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
24. Poynting, 'You want to Be a Coolie Woman?', p. 100.
25. Mahadai Das, *Bones* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1988), p. 47.
26. Espinet, p. 15.
27. Janice Shinebourne, *Timepiece* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1986), p. 37. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
28. Nalini Natarajan, Introduction to *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: a Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. by Emmanuel Nelson (Westport, Connecticut: London: Greenwood Press, 1993).
29. Shewcharan, p. 75.
30. Janice Shinebourne, 'Twin Influences: Guyana in the 1960s and Anglophone Caribbean Literature', in *Caribbean Women Writers*, ed. by S.R. Cudjoe (Massachusetts: Calaloux Publication, 1990), p. 144.